De ces engins, de ces efforts, de ces flûtes qui les tempéraient de leur musique; de ces opérations si exactes, de ces progrès à la fois si mystérieux et si clairs? Quelle confusion, tout d’abord, qui sembla se fondre dans l’ordre! Quelle solidité, quelle rigueur naquirent entre ces fils qui donnaient les aplombs, et le long de ces frêres cordeaux tendus pour être affleurés par la croissance des fils de briques!

Paul Valery, Eupalinos ou l’Architecte

Vers une architecture

Éditions Crès, Collection de “L’Esprit Nouveau”, Paris, 1923
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La publication of Vers une Architecture was published in Paris by Les Editions George Crès et Cie in December 1923 under the name of Le Corbusier-Saugnier (Charles-Édouard Jeanneret and Amédée Ozenfant). A large part of the book gathers together articles which appeared between October 1920 and May 1922 in the magazine L’Esprit Nouveau, but the final chapters, titled “Maisons en Série” and “Architecture ou Révolution” were new. Vers une Architecture met with wide and enduring success, being reprinted numerous times and translated into various languages from the 1920s on. Some of its key concepts (“la maison commune une machine à habiter”) and some dazzling insights (“l’architecture est un jeu, savant, correct et magnifique des volumes sous la lumière”) struck architecture’s collective imagination and rapidly became paradigms. The text is divided into three sections, each one consisting of three chapters, preceded by a sort of prologue (“Esthétique de l’Ingenieur Architecture”), with an insert called “Les Tracés Régulateurs” in between them. The two concluding chapters stand almost alone.

Some commentators on the book stressed that the text is a rare example of twenty-first century architectural treatise – indeed, and this is the interpretation offered by Pierluigi Nicolin in his presentation of the Italian translation, the endpoint and at the same time the turning point of this form of expression of thought. The book/palimpsest is the “counter-dance” of extraneousness in reciprocal friction. Nonetheless the chain of references produced in this context does not yield results of nihilism or dissolution, nor does it seem to hint at an intermediate or openly dreamlike-delusional realm – neither the fierceness of the Dadaist scream or a Surrealist disquieting suspension. On the contrary, Le Corbusier’s montage, albeit in its visionary intensity, is frankly positive: un esprit de construction et de synthèse. It establishes parallels, sets up connections, unifies underlying correlations; in other words it is a device that harmonizes the many facets of the Neuf Welt (E., May), making of a shapeless heap of separate, disparate (due to geography, history, or culture) episodes a cosmos supported by shared los-variables. The book’s approach marks the changed spiritual tone of the arts, the different Stimmung resulting from the disaster of the war – la guerre a secoué les torpeurs. Where the early twentieth-century movements had found unbridgeable lacerations and conflicts – first and foremost the irreconcilable enmity between the fluid immediacy of life and the fixity of every principle of form – Le Corbusier’s Laugierian retour à zero acts as an opening salvo for the unveling and restoration of a cosmic mathesis universals, the origin and telos of every operation and emancipation of subjective free will (Architecture Pure Création de l’Esprit: the new as a rediscovery of nomos, trans-historical and universal, lost: the cyclical destiny of every “classic,” doomed to an alternation of submergence and resurgence. Even the insistence on the urgency of a regeneration of the gaze – des yeux qui ne voient pas – confirms sight as the privileged organon in this vast strategy of rappel/retour to order, valuing its capacity for condensation and synthesis even in the fragmented, disturbed horizons of the Großstadt. Synthesis will thus be a detection of the subtle underlying web – esprit d’ordre – stretching, unapparent and uninterrupted, between the Parthenon and the Delage Grand Sport, Paestum and a Humbert, the worn marble of the Raison classique and the gleaming steel of the Civilisation machiniste. For, going beyond a certain purist elementarism inherited from the sculpture and painting tradition, the ideological and gravitational center of Vers une architecture lies in showing the harmony and balance between the region supérieure de l’esprit and the technocratic age, between nature and the plane of capital, emotion and calculation, the realm of liberty and actual practice. In the edification and safeguarding of these consonances must be found the primary function and ultimate legitimation of the phenomenon of architecture.

Fabrizio F.V. Arrigoni
translation by Susan Scott